

Learning from a Master: An Ulchi Shaman Teaches in America

Susan Grimaldi

Introduction



Mikhail (Misha) Duvan, the last remaining male shaman of the Ulchi Tribe, made a long journey from his home in Bulava, near the mighty Amur River in Siberia, to Sonoma, California. There he worked for six days (July 28-August 2, 1996) with 28 graduates of the FSS Three-Year Program in an advanced workshop sponsored by the Foundation.

Misha's traditional Ulchi culture was based largely on hunting. These Siberians lived close to nature, their survival depending upon their knowledge of, and relationship with, all of its aspects. Their personal stories are full of the details of nature. They involve bears, tigers, the forest, the sea, seal hunting, fishing, snowstorms, dog sleds, cold winds, and frigid temperatures.

Known to us as "Grandfather.", Misha is a small, boyish-looking 93-year-old (pictured to the left), who maintains a constant relationship with nature, ever aware of its presence. He moves through life exhibiting his connection, always honoring it. From

his presence I learned the most. His rhythms transported me. The eminence of his being beguiled me: knowing him and understanding how he lives has brought growth in my embrace of life's forces. Learning to pray with heart, I cried for his sufferings. I could hear his confusion as he sang:

I'm going on the path of the other people. Our lives and customs are different. I do not know. Help me. I go on the road of the unknown. Please help me. Please let these children live well and know happiness. Help me. Do not be offended by what you have seen or heard.

In telling his personal story, he said:

I don't speak Russian. I had to go to work when I was young. I didn't get to go to school. In 1917 my father built a house that burned. I came home and my house was burned. Water was far away. There was nothing left, just a little snow. Drums burned: I'm not a lucky guy. How are we to live? We fished and fished. Bears got my horses. That's how I live. What's to do? What's to do?

Misha was accompanied by fellow Ulchi, Nadezhda (Nadia) Duvan . She is a wisdom-keeper: the only one in whom the Bulava shamans confide their secrets. She is an expert on Ulchi culture and has been documenting it for years as an accomplished folklore performer. Along with her troupe, she has danced throughout Russia and also in Europe. Nadia (pictured right) is a skillful teacher. She explained how the Ulchi people see their world:

We live in harmony with nature. We are guests: we are temporary. We respect nature: the grasses, trees, rivers, and lakes. We see everything as living: seeing and feeling. When a hunter goes into the forest, he asks forgiveness. He asks for pardon from the master spirits and makes an offering. He gives the most delicious pieces of meat to the spirit of this place and thanks the master spirit of nature.

The transfer of knowledge from my mother to me occurred daily. I learned that you never need to think you are stronger than nature. Nature punishes us in its own way. It is important to address the environment with great humility. One must not ignore nature. This old folk wisdom is a huge gift to us all.

We of the younger generation forget we are temporary. We forget our harmony with nature.



During our six days with this pair of Siberians, we were steeped in Ulchi customs. We began most mornings listening to Nadia lecture on Ulchi legends, the meaning of their rituals, their world view, and their beliefs concerning life after death. Misha would often join these sessions, but seldom spoke.

As so often is the case in this kind of work with traditional shamans, language posed a problem. Misha spoke Ulchi, while Nadia spoke Ulchi and Russian. We needed a translator who spoke Russian and English to bridge the gap. Our sessions were filled with lively translations between these languages.

Taboos

We were taught some of the taboos surrounding shamans and their ceremonies. We were told that, even among themselves, the Ulchi always leave things out, never telling "the whole story." Nadia told us that "Pieces will have to come from inside yourselves: some are never spoken, but are secrets. They are not forced, not verbalized. They are passed through the pattern of life. Children will unnoticeably and suddenly pass them on to their children." We often heard Misha say: "That is enough talking! No more words!" We were cautioned not to speak of, or ask questions during or after a healing ceremony (kumlanya). We also learned that much of this knowledge is private and that it is considered rude to ask too many questions.

Offerings

Making offerings is of central importance in Ulchi ritual. It is also something they do daily as they arise. While making an offering, one makes a request for happiness, for the well-being of one's family and friends, and asks for success in work. Grandfather would kneel, placing tobacco and food into the water, at the base of a tree, or in the fire. He would pray to the Master of the Water, Land, Tree, Mountain, or to whatever local spirits were in the place he stood. It is in the act of sacrifice and offering that the Ulchi express their heartfelt gratitude for all that nature offers. Even if they have no food, they give tobacco or candy.

In the afternoons we watched Misha make ritual offerings, after which we participated by making our own. We made offerings to the Master of the Forest, Water, Sun, and Fire.

Dancing

We learned many dances during these afternoon sessions. We learned to dance like a seal, a reindeer, a bear, and a raven. All these dances were shamanic dances of animal transformation. During the dances we practiced the complex rhythms of the Ulchi drummers. All the dances we practiced were trance-inducing. In fact, for me to be able to beat the complex rhythm, sing, and move my body in the prescribed ways was too much for my "ordinary" mind to grasp. Only when I surrendered could I discover where it all comes from. Then it would work together in a natural and automatic way, becoming enjoyable.

Drumming

Many times during our week with Misha, he became inspired and began to drum and sing. These were some of the best moments for me. I loved to watch him hunch his shoulders into the drum and move with strength and grace. He seemed to sing from his soul. The Ulchi play large, narrow-hooped drums that have a flexible cross-tie on their back side (serving as a handle), making it possible for the drum to bounce back and be struck by the knuckles or finger tip on the underside of the drumhead. They combine this back hit with regular beats on the drum face and with clicks as they hit the rim of the drum with the flat, fur covered beater, called a gispu. Thus, they play amazing rhythm sequences, making one wonder how all this sound comes from one drummer. Nadia explained:

Rhythms played by shamans reveal what the spirits are commanding of them. Grandfather can work with the voice of the swan, and then in a moment a new rhythm begins. When calling a flying spirit, the beat is soft and tender. When calling Tiger, the sound is stronger. When searching, they have a high rhythm. When driving out illness, they get faster and louder. For divination, a more monotonous tone is played. For a fish transformation, they play the drum with the beater gliding over the drum face, which indicates going into the water, head down, coming up for air and then gliding. The shamans' rhythms are improvised, expressing the moment in their journey.

Nadia asked us about our use of one rhythm. Not wanting to offend us, but trying to understand, she noted, "There is nothing to show what you are meeting. Our shamans start up slowly, then their rhythms express the experience, or they stop and just sing."

Bear Cult

The Bear Cult is common in Siberian cultures, where it is of major ritual importance. It is even found among the Ainu of northern Japan. Although suppressed by the Soviets, knowledge of it has survived and is currently being revived by a number of Siberian peoples. Nadia and Misha taught us about the Ulchi version.



< Misha watching the group do the Bear Dance

On our first day, we gathered in the forest to learn the bear dances. These dances are normally done during the Ritual

of the Bear. in which the Ulchi make their largest offering for the insurance of the clan's harmony. Nadia explained:

This ritual is for the Ulchi people a way to honor those people who have gone before us and died. It is also for honoring one's parents and insuring their passage. Our people never forget their ancestors who have left the Middle World. We know they have gone to the Lower World and we know they have their own life there.

A log was hung horizontally from two trees. This instrument, called the yujaju, or "log drum." is played by many people each hitting two sticks in repetitive rhythm patterns.



The dancers walked, leaning on two long sticks. feet turned inward, stepping forward, tapping out rhythms with the sticks, walking like a bear. Then we learned the dance called "Bear Eating." We chanted. "Karugda. karugda. chak kum, chak kum. karugda" side stepping as we opened and closed our arms, hitting the sticks upon the ground. We also learned how a bear sits and how a bear rests.



This ceremony only happens every three to five years. A bear cub is taken from the wild and raised for three years. Tears slipped down Nadia's cheeks as she told us, "On the face of the bear they see their son, their parent." The bear is seen as a messenger to the deceased. It is raised by the entire clan and is free to roam the streets, going into any house and being hand-fed the best food.

When the time comes to sacrifice the bear, the people of the village and neighboring villages gather. At the time of the killing, the women beat the rhythms of the bear's life on the log drum and remember those who have gone to the Lower World-and they cry.

The Soul

I was particularly interested in the Ulchi concept of the soul. They understand that every person has an invisible soul that can make temporary departures from the body, which is its temporary envelope. The soul can move, turn into something else, or just travel.

A wandering soul is without a master, without a home. This needs to be rectified. The soul needs to be put into a safe place. One of the shaman's jobs is to make the patient safe, which is accomplished when the shaman puts their soul in a safe place. Then there is balance. Nadia said that when she was younger, her soul was being stored. When "Grandmother" had her soul stored safely, she felt great and she didn't get sick. "Grandmother knew my soul was there: it was being well protected. She explained that, "If your soul is kept in a safe place by the shaman, it is possible for it to get out and it may be necessary to find it and put it back again." Grandfather told us, "You find it, you put it back in a safe place, make a new search, and find a stronger safe place." The spirit master of the storage place lets him know if a soul has escaped and he restores it.

Helping Spirits

The Ulchi shaman refers to his helping spirits as savin. Effigies of these spirits are carved in wood and used for healing. These are carried by hunters as guardians, to provide success in the hunt, and for protection.

When shamans complete healing work, they will often make a prescription of a specific savin. Patients can make their own or order them from the village woodcarver. Savin are carved from live larch wood. Many of the savin are traditional. Some are new images received by the shaman for a specific problem. One such new image was described as having the head and right paw of a bear.

Nadia taught us to, "bring offering food to them (the savin): touch their lips. Either wear them or keep them in a box with the lid open, and the illness will pass slowly."

Kasaa Shaman Ritual

We were very privileged to be present for a kasaa shaman ritual, which is done by a shaman accompanying a deceased person's soul to the Lower World. A kasaa shaman makes the road to the Lower World for someone who has died, making sure they can find their house in that world. Nadia stated, "It is a unique and important ritual, not done by all. Only shamans of the highest rank have the right to do this, not a simple shaman." She said this was the first time this ritual has been shown outside Siberia. It is considered to be a very dangerous undertaking.

Before the ceremony began, Nadia and Grandfather went to a sacred place in a house where an altar was covered with a white cloth. As he prepared, he made offerings and his face was smudged. He prayed, asking permission: "I am here only to teach. I ask the Master of the House not to be angry. Father and Mother come help me. I don't know what road to take. I am a stranger in this land."

The rest of us were outside in the ceremonial area, drumming softly to strengthen Grandfather. As it grew dark he came out and stood on a four-foot-high platform that was flanked by two forked and leafed eucalyptus poles. Hanging from the forks were metal clangors, called yampa, and curled wood streamers. We were cautioned to quickly sit and make no noise. Three men stood near Grandfather to catch him if he fell. Holding the poles, he began to sing:

I go to two poles. I bow to you three times. I don't know why I'm standing here. Please do not be angry with me. My body is dark blue. I cannot speak or sing. My body is taken away. Let's go the edge of the mountains. I'm flying. If you cannot hear me now, I hope you'll be able to hear me soon. I'm going on the road of the taiga (forest) people. I'm afraid to touch this road.

He shook the trees and the yampa changed. I felt scared for him. He began to question one of the men present. "Who went first, your mother or your father?" His questions concerned the family, the parent's deaths and the shape of the graves. His journey continued as he sang:

I'm going through mountains, ponds and rivers. I ask permission: lead me well upon this road. I'm singing with the voice of the golden bird. Please protect me well. Do not be offended by what you have seen or heard. Master of the House, I bow to you. I bow to your door. I don't know your language. I hope the Master of the Door is not offended. Threshold Master, I bow to you. It is difficult to step on you. All of the steps that go into the threshold are sacred and should not be fouled. I stand before you and I sing. Please protect these children. I beg you. I'm learning from the sun: I stand at dawn.

He began to lurch forward and the tree poles bent. The three men moved closer. He started to go wild, shaking as he fell back into their arms. He was carefully carried to his chair inside as he vibrated with intensity. He went to the altar, drank deeply, kneeled and swayed as he sang of his experiences. After bowing his head to the floor, he began to drum and moved to the open door, singing to the spirits. He proceeded to do healing work, sweeping several people with the wood streamers, pressing their heads and directing them to the threshold.

The Ritual of Fire

The Ritual of Fire is done when a hunter is sent out at funerals or each month for three years after a person has died. Each month when the moon wanes, the deceased's relatives come to the grave and bring offerings and give them to the fire so the deceased can receive nourishment. Things that belonged to the dead person are burned. Things not placed in their coffin can reach them this way. Fire has its own master. Fire represents the family and the continuity of the clan. The Ulchi put food in the fire and ask the Master of the Fire to take the offerings and not to be offended. They speak as their soul directs them.

While kneeling, Grandfather drummed and sang, talking to the spirit, the Master of Fire. He flicked vodka and cried:

I'm not a shaman. I'm just a little man. Oh. I know you need this ritual. Do not let me frighten you. I don't know why they don't have these things here. I'll speak to them and let them know. Please forgive me for whatever we did wrong. I will tell these people what needs to be done.

Closing Comments

I felt tremendous appreciation for the courage and sacrifice Misha and Nadia made to be with us. I was grateful to be shown so much about the Ulchi ways. Although the Soviet period did great damage to their culture, it is still connected with its traditions. Their traditional rhythms, legends, dances, and prayers are still woven into the fabric of their life. at least for Misha and those of his generation.

The more they shared, the more acutely aware I became of the loss of our old. folk customs. I looked for answers. Are there ways to regain this fullness of culture, when so much is lost and everyone is so scattered?

I began to see that beyond the Ulchi customs, there were things I could take with me as an individual. I looked for the lessons within the teachings. Having a reverence for all aspects of nature is of central importance. How to walk, eat, and breathe that appreciation and connection, is what Misha showed us. It is in that union that one finds balance.

NOTE

Anthropologists use the term *Bear Cult* to describe an elaborate ritual treatment of bears in Siberia and elsewhere. The term *Cult* has an unfortunate and negative connotation in modern American English. We use the traditional term here to correctly identify the Bear Ritual of the Ulchi to readers familiar with the Siberian Bear Cult literature.